

# Stephen Foster

## *Maker of American Songs*



IN THE Hall of Fame for Great Americans at New York University where the most distinguished men in the history of our country are enshrined in statuary and memorial tablets, there is only one musician. Stephen Collins Foster, the creator of the first distinctively American musical idiom, the singer of the commonplace, the elemental, and the democratic, stands with William Penn and Benjamin Franklin to represent Pennsylvania's contribution to our national heritage.

Stephen Foster is the only maker of songs so far honored by admittance to the company of Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and the others whose names are an imperishable part of the story of America. No city or state or section of the country can completely claim such men. They belong to the nation and the world.

It is nevertheless true that Stephen Collins Foster was a Pennsylvanian, born in Pittsburgh on July 4, 1826, and a resident of that community for most of his life. It was the place he loved best and the place where most of his great songs were written. He left his home often, but always to return—the last time in death.

Someone has said that it is the fate of poets to be quoted and forgotten. At one time this could have been said of Foster. There were few Americans who had not heard his music and sung his songs and loved them, but the identity of the man who created them was until recent years in danger of being lost. His songs almost became folk songs in the fullest sense—songs that grow from a people seemingly without any definite point of origin. Who does not know "Old Black Joe," "Old Folks at Home," "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground"? Certainly many more know these songs than know about their composer, Stephen Foster. This shy, retiring young man was the son of a Pittsburgh businessman and politician. His brother was a builder of the Pennsylvania canal system and the Pennsylvania Railroad, and his sister married the brother of President James Buchanan.

This ninth child of the prosperous Foster family early showed indications of great musical talent. When only nine years old he was singing in children's amateur theatricals; and his family encouraged him in learning to play various musical instruments, in which he showed ability. His first

written musical composition came when he was just fourteen years old. It was "The Tioga Waltz" and was performed in Bradford County at the "exhibition" or commencement of Athens Academy. The youthful Foster had been sent there to spend some time with his elder brother William, who was then working on the construction of the North Branch Canal, and he had been enrolled in the well-known academy at Athens, historic Tioga Point.

His first published song, "Open Thy Lattice, Love," was on the market when he was eighteen years old. There followed "Old Uncle Ned," "Oh! Susanna," and others, so that by the time Stephen was twenty-one his songs were becoming known throughout the country. That was the great age of the minstrel show where both rousing songs and sentimental ballads found a place. Many of Foster's early songs were composed especially for such minstrel troupes, and about 1850 he made a business arrangement with the greatest of the contemporary minstrel showmen. He gave John P. Christy, leader of the famous Christy Minstrels, the right to make first performances of his songs, in return for which the title pages of the songs when printed bore the statement that they were "As Sung by the Christy Minstrels." In this way the greatest minstrel troupe of the day helped to promote Stephen Foster's songs.

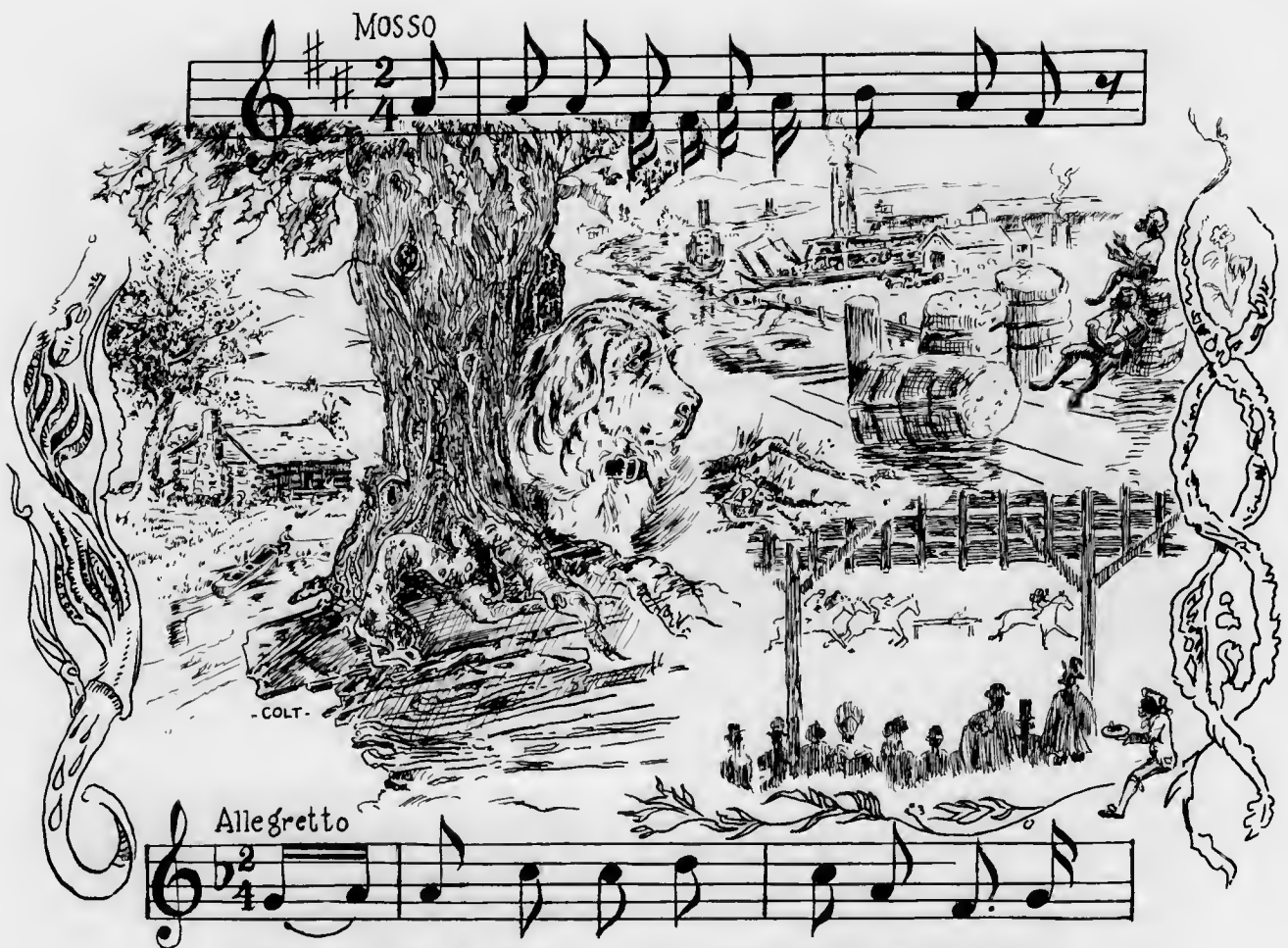


*The Old-Time Minstrel Show*

Until his untimely death at thirty-seven years of age, Foster continued to compose. There is record today of more than two hundred songs and compositions, some of them still sung not only in our own country but in places as remote as China, Australia, and Africa. He wrote songs in negro dialect and in good English, humorous ditties, sentimental parlor songs, love ballads, and hymns. The "Forty-Niners," those almost legendary heroes of the California "gold rush" days adopted "Oh! Susanna" as their theme song; northern soldiers in the Civil War sang "My Old Kentucky Home"; while the southerners sang plaintively of "Old Folks at Home." In spite of his Democratic leanings and his relationship by marriage to President Buchanan, Foster even wrote a Civil War recruiting song, "We Are Coming, Father Abraham, One Hundred Thousand Strong." His songs have been freely adapted by political parties for campaign purposes since 1848; symphonic arrangements have been made of them and played before enthusiastically receptive audiences; eminent singers have included his songs in their repertoires; and schools, homes, churches, and all sorts of assemblages have used his melodies through the years. His works are as popular today as ever.

For his deathless music Stephen Foster received poor pay and little glory, if measured by modern standards. Some of this may be attributed to his own lack of business sense. It should be remembered, however, that there was then no international copyright and no organization to enforce payment for the right to perform his compositions; something which composers have today thanks to the efforts of an adoptive Pennsylvanian, Victor Herbert. Foster's chief source of income was in royalties from the sale of published music. Even with the limitations of that period, he received more than fifteen thousand dollars for his songs between 1849 and 1860. With average earnings of about fourteen hundred dollars a year in the 1850's he had sufficient income to consider marriage.

Stephen Foster married Jane Denny McDowell, daughter of a Pittsburgh physician, on July 22, 1850. They had one daughter, Marion, in 1851, about the time when he wrote his most famous song, "Old Folks at Home." But their marriage was not happy, and the clashes of their temperaments led to several separations. His domestic problems, the death of his parents in 1855, and



*Some famous songs by Stephen Foster are suggested in this composite picture*

his monetary troubles bore upon him heavily, and unfortunately he often sought refuge in alcohol. Under such circumstances, the quality of his compositions declined in his later years.

In 1860 he moved to New York City, but his income fell so low that his wife and daughter had to return to western Pennsylvania where Mrs. Foster became a telegraph operator for the Pennsylvania Railroad at Greensburg. Refusing any help from his family, Stephen Foster sank into poverty in the New York of Civil War days. In the summer of 1863, in one final outpouring of creative power, he wrote "Beautiful Dreamer," one of his finest compositions; but this was the last of the great songs from his pen, and it was not published during his lifetime. Broken in health and alone, he died on January 13, 1864, in Bellevue Hospital at New York City. Hospital attendants

found in his pockets just thirty-eight cents and a final message, "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts." The latter phrase, penciled on a scrap of paper, is thought to be the theme which Foster planned to use in his next song. After his death, his wife and his brother Morrison took his body back to Pittsburgh, and he now lies in Allegheny Cemetery. Strangely enough, the hospital where he died is only a few blocks away from the Hall of Fame where his bronze bust now occupies a place of honor.

More than ever Stephen Collins Foster is today being appreciated for what he was—the first American, *really American*, composer. Before and during his lifetime other composers were writing music in America, but it was not really American music; rather, it was music imitative of European styles. Foster wrote of American people in Ameri-

can situations. The sentiments of friendship, home, loyalty, love, simplicity, and humbleness that fill his works are universally understood and loved, but the situations and characters from which they developed are always specifically and unmistakably American—as American as the broad reaches of the Mississippi River, as the covered wagon and the western frontier.

In the busy western Pennsylvania metropolis which Foster knew as home, there stands today on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh a magnificent building memorializing his genius. This Stephen Collins Foster Memorial houses a library devoted to Foster's music and related works. Here are also to be found personal belongings, original manuscripts and records, family records, and pictures—all carefully preserved.

This son of Pennsylvania has memorials in other states. Kentucky has made "My Old Kentucky Home" its state song, and preserves Federal Hill in Bardstown, Kentucky, as a state shrine, assuming that Foster visited relatives there and thus was inspired to write the song. Florida has made "Old Folks at Home" its state song and has developed a Stephen Foster Memorial State Park on the banks of the Suwannee River. These are only the



*The Stephen Collins Foster Memorial  
at the University of Pittsburgh*

most notable memorials to Foster, for there are many others.

Although Pennsylvania has no state song from the pen of Stephen Foster, Pennsylvanians take pride in the tributes from other states and are convinced that his melodic songs are simply an expression of the American heritage of culture and music which he knew in their own Keystone State.

*Stephen C. Foster*